

Applied Learning

Broad, Integrative Knowledge

Specialized Knowledge

Intellectual Skills

Civic Learning

The Degree Qualifications Profile

Defining degrees: A new direction for American higher education to be tested and developed in partnership with faculty, students, leaders and stakeholders



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The Degree Qualifications Profile — Executive summary

With the assistance of four writers and dozens of expert reviewers, Lumina Foundation for Education offers the first step in creating a Degree Qualifications Profile for American higher education. The Degree Profile is a baseline set of reference points for what students should do to earn associate, bachelor's and master's degrees — regardless of their field of specialization.

As all stakeholders in higher education focus more intently on increasing degree attainment, it is more important than ever to fully understand the meaning of those degrees. While many institutions have worked to identify student learning outcomes to inform their own work, these efforts have been largely invisible to students and other key players. The Degree Profile seeks to clearly define the learning that students should acquire. It does this by establishing reference points regarding the level and nature of the learning. The reference points aim to do all of the following:

- Help postsecondary students better understand the work they will engage in at an institution.
- Focus and organize efforts to ensure institutional accountability.
- Help faculty and institutions in their assessment efforts.
- Create a common vocabulary for all stakeholders.

The Degree Profile seeks to be comprehensive and is unique in the following ways:

- The student, not the institution, is the primary reference point. The Degree Profile applies to all students, not merely the small samples who take standardized tests.
- The Degree Profile presents outcomes for three levels of degrees, and it does so by articulating increasing levels of challenge for student performance for each of the learning outcomes it frames.
- The Degree Profile's learning outcomes are expressed through the use of active verbs — e.g., “identifies,” “categorizes,” “prioritizes,” “evaluates” — because these are the key elements of assignments (papers, performances, projects, examinations, exhibits, etc.) through which student competence is demonstrated. Nouns and noun phrases such as “ability,” “awareness,” “appreciation” and “critical thinking” are not used as learning outcomes precisely because they do not lead directly to assessments of competence or mastery.
- The Degree Profile is transformational in that it offers a qualitative set of specific learning outcomes — not quantitative measures such as number of credits and grade point averages — as the supplementary grounds for awarding degrees.
- A wide range of stakeholders will help develop this Degree Profile further and test the range of its potential applications.

The student learning outcomes, or competencies, are organized in five broad categories:

1. **Specialized Knowledge.** Independent of the vocabularies, theories and skills of particular fields, what students in any specialization should demonstrate with respect to the specialization itself.
2. **Broad, Integrative Knowledge.** Something that transcends typical distribution requirements bounded by the first two years of higher education. This category of competencies is about bringing together learning from broad fields of study throughout the three degree levels covered in the Degree Profile.
3. **Intellectual Skills.** Both traditional and nontraditional cognitive operations are brought together and in sometimes new formulations: communications fluencies, quantitative fluencies, analytic operations, use of information resources, and the capacity to perceive from different points of reference.
4. **Applied Learning.** What students can do with what they know, demonstrated by innovation and fluency in addressing unscripted problems at work and in other non-classroom settings.
5. **Civic Learning.** Integration of knowledge and skills in applications that facilitate student articulation and response to social, environmental and economic challenges at local, national and global levels.

The Degree Profile is more than merely a new way to tackle accountability in U.S. higher education. In fact, it differs from current approaches to accountability in at least three important ways.

- First, current accountability markers are principally limited to degree-completion data and lack any sense of what degrees mean in terms of concrete performance criteria.
- Second, most current accountability portfolios are based on simple measurements that reflect retrospective opinions that have no impact on the academic lives of future students.
- Finally, the Degree Profile offers qualitative guidance to both students and a society that asks: “So, you hold this degree; what did you really do to earn it?”

The Degree Profile thus has several potential uses. As faculty and students collaborate in planning an individualized course of study, it can be a useful guide for building a comprehensive degree. Similarly, as institutions add or adjust degree programs, the Degree Profile can aid in the design of these curricula. Those seeking to assure the quality of academic programs may find the Degree Profile a useful tool as they consider institutional offerings. Other uses include the Degree Profile as a potential framework to align degree levels and as a new way to consider college readiness. It also can be an aid in assessing incoming students’ prior learning and out-of-classroom learning.

Lumina by no means sees the current version of the Degree Profile as final. In fact, it is designed specifically to be an iterative document that will be refined and shaped through practical application. This testing will almost certainly illuminate additional, unanticipated uses for the Degree Profile.

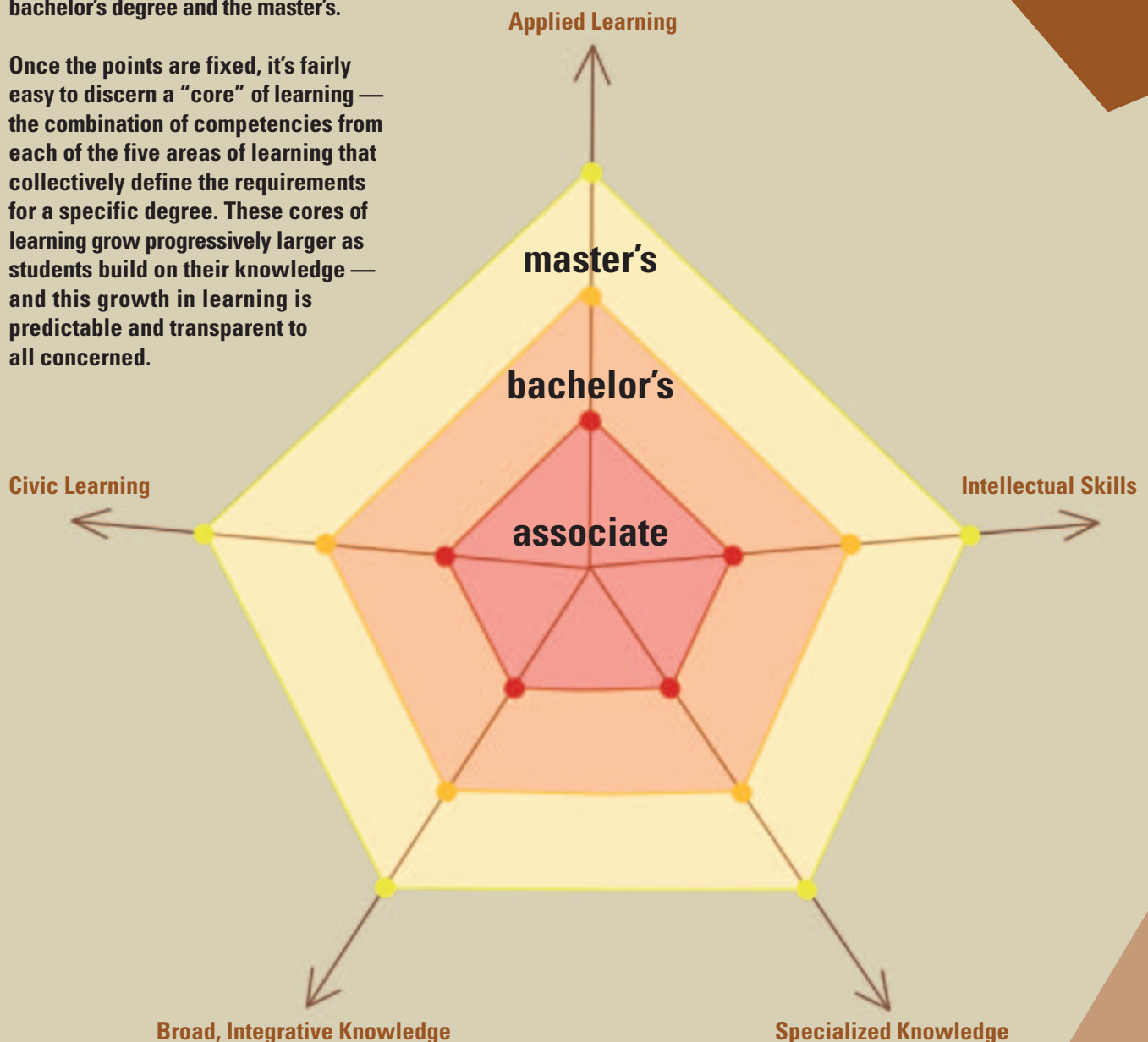
To obtain a copy of the full Degree Profile, visit www.luminafoundation.org/publications, where you can order a printed copy or download a printable document.

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To best understand the practical application of the Degree Profile, it is helpful to view it as a spiderweb: a structured and interconnected series of ladders that simultaneously build on and support one another. The web is strung among five anchor lines, each line representing one of the basic areas of learning. Along each line, three points are fixed to indicate the extent of learning required to reach each rung on the ladder: the associate degree, the bachelor's degree and the master's.

Once the points are fixed, it's fairly easy to discern a "core" of learning — the combination of competencies from each of the five areas of learning that collectively define the requirements for a specific degree. These cores of learning grow progressively larger as students build on their knowledge — and this growth in learning is predictable and transparent to all concerned.

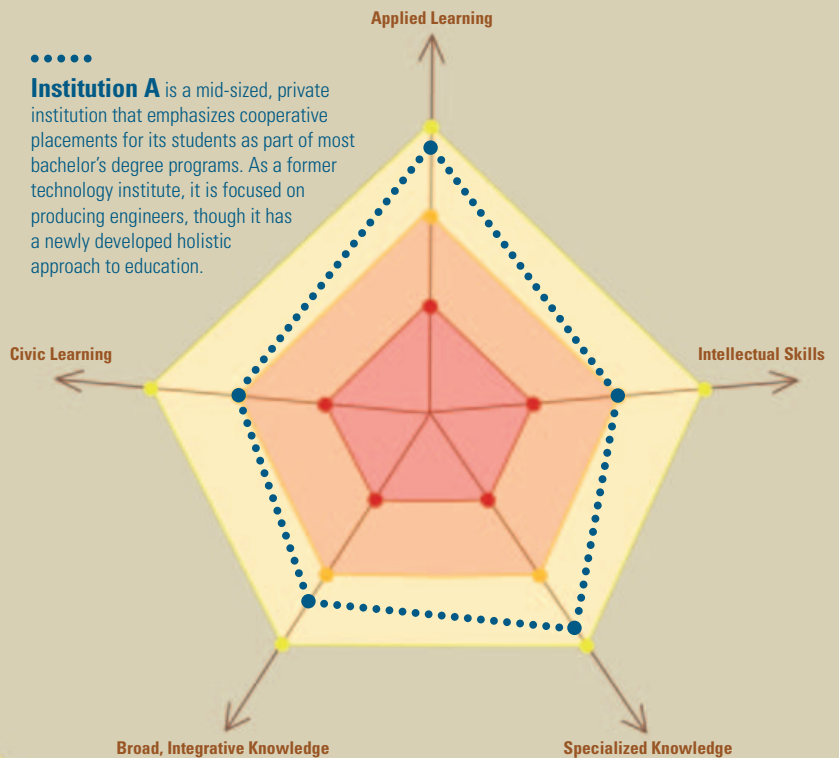
And yet, predictability and transparency do not lead to rigid standardization. In fact, though certain core learning outcomes are expected in all programs, the range of course content can vary widely — by institution, by discipline — even by individual class section.



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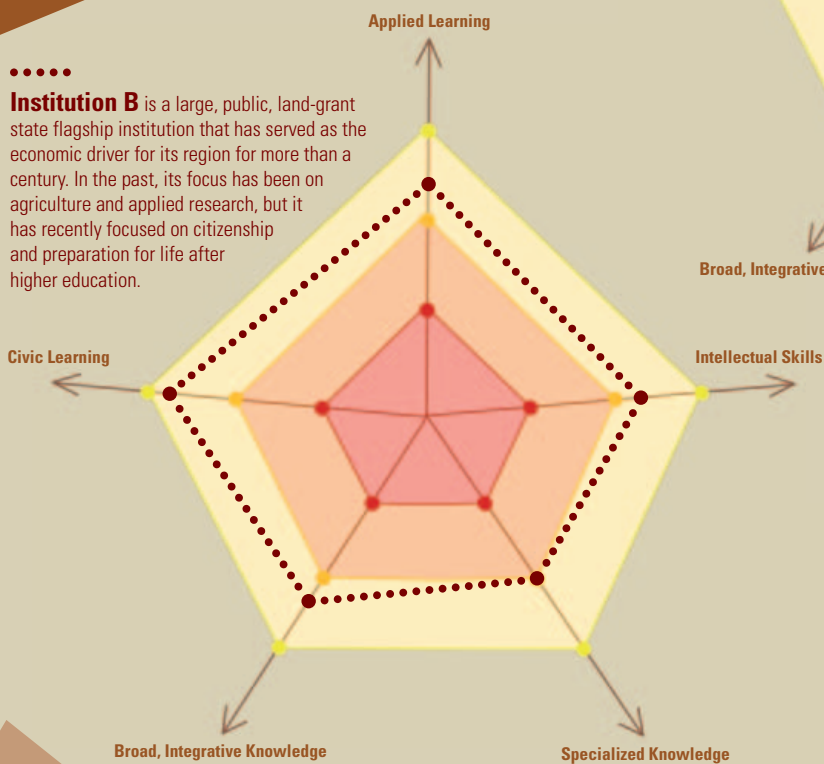
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Institution A is a mid-sized, private institution that emphasizes cooperative placements for its students as part of most bachelor's degree programs. As a former technology institute, it is focused on producing engineers, though it has a newly developed holistic approach to education.



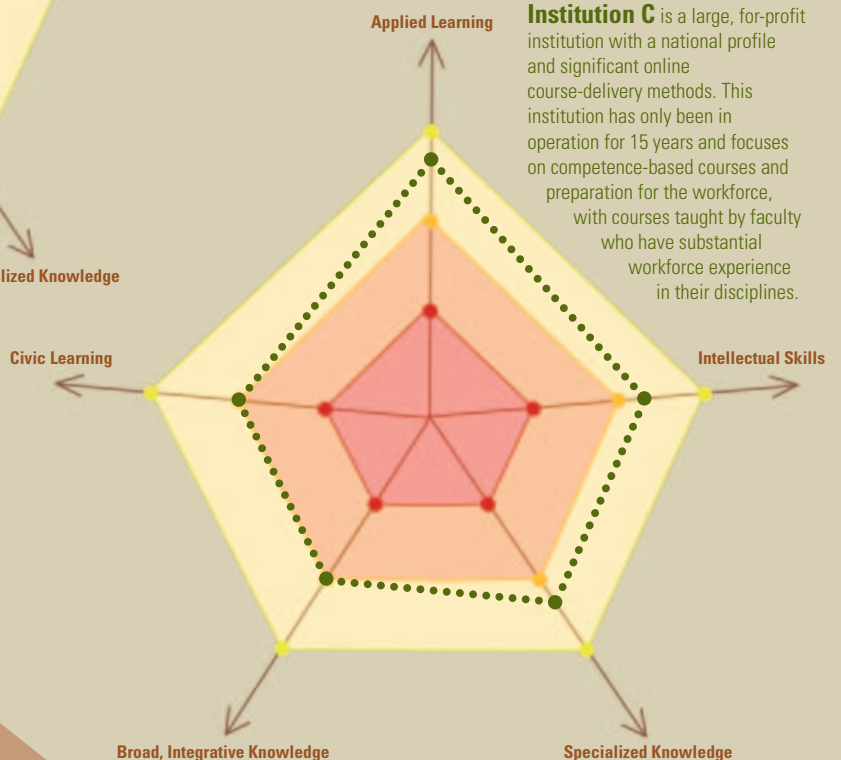
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Institution B is a large, public, land-grant state flagship institution that has served as the economic driver for its region for more than a century. In the past, its focus has been on agriculture and applied research, but it has recently focused on citizenship and preparation for life after higher education.



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Institution C is a large, for-profit institution with a national profile and significant online course-delivery methods. This institution has only been in operation for 15 years and focuses on competence-based courses and preparation for the workforce, with courses taught by faculty who have substantial workforce experience in their disciplines.



3 degrees
5 areas of learning
3 types of institutions

To illustrate the Degree Profile's ability to accommodate almost limitless variety among institutions, three types of institutions are plotted on spiderwebs. Though the bachelor's degree requirements for all three institutions encompass the core learning outcomes, it is clear that each institution also has discrete areas of emphasis and focus for its students.



Lumina Foundation for Education, an Indianapolis-based private foundation, is committed to enrolling and graduating more students from college — especially 21st century students: low-income students, students of color, first-generation students and adult learners. Lumina's goal is to increase the proportion of Americans who hold high-quality degrees and credentials to 60 percent by 2025. Lumina pursues this goal in three ways: by identifying and supporting effective practice, through public policy advocacy, and by using our communications and convening power to build public will for change.

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